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It's Not Just A Hometown Bakery Anymore

CLARKSBURG - Mike Harris knew at an early age what he wanted to do when he grew up. While the neighborhood kids were out playing games and riding bicycles, Mike was hard at work at Home Industry, the local bakery shop.

This small business began about 100 years ago in the Adamston area of Clarksburg. The name came from local people baking goods in their homes and bringing them to the bakery to sale. After a fire destroyed the business, it relocated to Main Street in downtown Clarksburg.

Mike Harris was about 14 years old when he started helping out around the bakery. Later as a young man, his main job was as a driver for the City of Clarksburg bus service. His shift as a bus driver began around mid-morning, but the early hours would find him hard at work in the bakery shop.

In 1984, Mike and his young wife Pam were approached with an opportunity to purchase the bakery. Eager to fulfill their dreams of becoming small business owners, they put together a business plan and loan package then tried to secure financing. Their enthusiasm was short lived, however, as they were turned down by three separate lending institutions.

One of the problems was that as newlyweds, they didn't have assets or collateral to pledge as security. But their parents chipped in and offered their homes as security. With the support and backing of their parents, they pushed onward and approached Union National Bank (now Bank One), who suggested a U.S. Small Business Administration guaranty loan which allowed them to purchase the store.

About this same time, Meadowbrook Mall opened in neighboring Bridgeport which began the exodus of local shops and customers from the downtown area. Mike and Pam knew they had to make same changes and, quickly, in order to keep their business viable.

They decided to take their product "on the road," making deliveries to local businesses out of back of their Ford Escort station wagon. This opened additional opportunities for the "little bakery" as several local food convenience stores began requesting their pepperoni rolls on a regular basis.

But times weren't always good, and during 1992, Mike and Pam considered selling the business due to the downswing in the economy. "It was getting difficult to make ends meet," said Pam, "but we were determined to make it work."

With Pam hitting the road to do marketing and Mike, in the background, doing everything from baking to delivering, things began to turn around and the business began to show signs of growth.

Then in 1994 they faced with another huge dilemma, their landlord decided to terminate the lease on the Main Street location. Needing additional funding to move to a new location, they again turned to the SBA for help. With the assistance of another SBA guaranty loan, they were able to move their operation just around the corner and down the street.

Today with 22 employees and five delivery vans, Home Industry Bakery pepperoni rolls can be found on the shelves of Pantry Stores, Go-Marts, Sheetz, and yes, even Wal-Mart. They have a delivery route of approximately 300 customers and deliver to areas as far west as Marietta, Ohio and as far north as Uniontown Pennsylvania, as well as all points between.

It took Pam two years to convince the local Wal-Marts to carry their products. "Persistence pays off," Pam stated. "You have to believe in yourself and in your product." Pam feels that their biggest asset is the employees. "They are like an extended family," she said. "Some of our employees have been with us for 17 years. Without good employees, you can't have a successful business."

You can see the excitement when Pam starts talking about running a small business. "Marketing and sales is my favorite part," said Pam. "It's fun, easy, and you get to meet all kinds of people With a degree from the "School of Hard Knocks," she feels all of their success comes from the customer. "The key is to pay attention to your customers, the customer is always right," said Pam.

They must be listening. In 2003, this little 100-year old business generated \$1 million in sales.

So what's next? "We're looking for a larger building where we can expand," Pam concluded. "And we'll again look to the SBA for assistance. They were there for us in the past and will be there again."

For additional information about the programs and services offered by the SBA, contact the West Virginia District Office at 1-800-767-8052 ext. 8 or by email at wvinfo@sba.gov, or visit our web site at www.sba.gov/wv.

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